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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001794

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/31/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POLITICAL MANEUVERS DIVERT PROGRESS
TOWARD DIALOGUE

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A flurry of recent activity on the domestic political front suggests that President Chandrika Kumaratunga may be planning to ensure her hold on power past her term limit by attempting to abolish the executive presidency and succeeding to the post of prime minister. Achieving this aim involves a series of complicated and controversial steps of questionable constitutionality. The President's machinations will inevitably increase the already substantial partisan distrust between her and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, while potentially deepening the growing rift between her and her largest coalition partner, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP). Besides the risk of fostering even greater disunity among the mainstream political forces, the President's preoccupation with her personal political future is diverting her and others' attention and energy away from the greatest challenge of her administration--the peace process. End summary.

MINISTERS MULTIPLY

2. (SBU) While there has been no recent discernible progress toward resumed negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), over the past ten days the domestic political scene has witnessed a flurry of feverish maneuvering, aisle-crossing, finger-pointing and positioning. On October 30 President Chandrika Kumaratunga appointed three dissident MPs from the opposition Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) as non-Cabinet Ministers, bringing to 83--or more than one-third the number of MPs in Parliament--the total of Ministers (38), Deputy Ministers (42) and non-Cabinet Ministers (3) named since the April general elections. With the defection of the three SLMC malcontents, Kumaratunga's slender majority in the 225-seat Parliament hit 117. Kumaratunga's penchant for bestowing posts has drawn sharp criticism from coalition partner Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which accounts for only a comparatively modest eight Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

PLANS TO OUST UNP SPEAKER CONFIRMED

3. (SBU) In an October 28 press conference, Government Spokesman and Information Minister Mangala Samaraweera confirmed the opposition United National Party's (UNP) worst fears by asserting that the ruling coalition is considering ways to oust UNP MP W.J.M. Lokubandara from his post as Speaker of Parliament. (Note: Hypothetically, this could be achieved with a simple majority bringing a vote of no confidence against the Speaker. In reality, however, this may be easier said than done. The President may not be able to count on the eight votes of Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) MPs, which joined the government in September with the proviso that it would not participate in a no-confidence motion. End note.) With the Opposition Speaker safely out of the way, a more pliant substitute chosen by the government could introduce a motion to convert Parliament into a constituent assembly, UNP sources fear--a move that requires only a simple majority for passage. According to one possible scenario, the President could then attempt to fulfill her campaign pledge to abolish the executive presidency--and the two-term limit that will eventually force her from office--in favor of an executive prime ministership (with no term limits). If such a change to the Constitution is endorsed by the Parliament-turned-constituent assembly and is confirmed by a referendum, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse would obligingly step aside, allowing Kumaratunga to fill his slot.

IN FOR THE LONG TERM

4. (SBU) In the same press conference Samaraweera also

articulated what many have long assumed--that the President considers her second term to have begun in August 2000--when she was allegedly sworn in by Chief Justice Sarath Silva--rather than in December 1999 when she won the election. The President's stance, while obviously controversial (only she, the Chief Justice and the Foreign Minister were present at the hush-hush ceremony, which was only publicized much after the fact), appears to be constitutionally defensible--especially since the Chief Justice has already indicated he will support the "long view" of the President's term. Because presidential elections take place in December, moreover, the eight-month hiatus between her election and swearing-in actually gives Kumaratunga a whole extra year as President, with elections--at least according to the Government--being contemplated for December 2006.

JVP SNIPING

15. (SBU) While the President may be maneuvering to secure an extended hold as head of government, the JVP, her largest coalition partner, continues to play the part of a not-so-loyal opposition, criticizing the government--and even Kumaratunga herself--on a variety of fronts. In the run-up to the budget presentation on November 18, Small Industries Minister and JVP MP Lal Kantha garners substantial media coverage by regularly lambasting the government for its inability to keep down the cost of living and its failure to institute promised salary hikes. A high-visibility spitting match between Maitripala Sirisena, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) General Secretary and Mahaweli (River Valley) Development Minister, and Anura Dissanayake, the JVP Agriculture Minister, over a politically charged development project prompted the President to call for an investigation into possible misappropriation of funds by Dissanayake's ministry. In retaliation, on October 23 JVP MP Nanda Gunatilleke publicly blasted the President's failure to abide by her agreement to consult her coalition partner on all Cabinet-level appointments and decisions, threatening that Kumaratunga's continued free-lancing might cost her critical JVP support in the Provincial Councils. Another salvo followed at a seminar held by the National Patriotic Organization, a JVP front, on October 24, when JVP MP and Propaganda Secretary Wimal Weerawansa described the President as little more than an "oil cake" until JVP support gave her the strength needed to face down the rival UNP and win the general elections in April. Although Weerawansa later publicly amended his remarks to note that he had not meant to ridicule the President, it is hard to mistake the tenor of his comments as anything other than a warning to Kumaratunga that she still needs the JVP--especially if she wants to take on the UNP yet again by attempting to dump the Speaker.

COMMENT

16. (C) Political intrigue--and holding the national interest hostage to such intrigue--is, regrettably, nothing new to Sri Lanka. What is especially disappointing about the current feverish politicking is that it is shunting aside other, more pressing national problems (like resuming negotiations with the LTTE) to a distant second place. The energy and attention the President is expending to ensure her hold on power could be more usefully directed at ensuring her place in history by reinvigorating the peace process. Unfortunately, however, the partisan political game she seems intent on playing is guaranteed to generate further distrust, bickering and subterfuge, rather than to promote the national unity needed to address the challenges ahead.

LUNSTEAD